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ABSTRACT

This study examined children's beliefs in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy as well as the effects of parental encouragement or support of these fantasy characters upon the children's beliefs. Subjects were 60 children aged 4, 6 and 8 years and their parents. Measures included a parental questionnaire and child interviews. Partial results show that children's belief in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy are related to age and to parental encouragement of these beliefs. By 8 years of age children have begun to relinquish their beliefs in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny but belief in the Tooth Fairy is still strong. Parents appear to be more involved in promoting children's beliefs in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy than in the Easter Bunny. The author is currently studying other correlates of children's beliefs in these mythical characters. (MS)

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Some Fantasy Characters of Young Children: An Examination of Children's Beliefs in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny[1]

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SOME FANTASY CHARACTERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN: AN EXAMINATION OF CHILDREN'S BELIEFS IN SANTA CLAUS, THE TOOTH FAIRY, AND THE EASTER BUNNY

Today I would like to discuss some findings from a larger research effort which focuses on an important but neglected feature of children's development: the fantasy characters, mythical figures, and imaginary companions of young children. A partial list of this phenomena includes: Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, the Great Pumpkin, Jack Frost, the Sandman, the Boogey-man, and other witches, fairies and imaginary characters. These fantasy characters are one aspect of children's involvement in fantasy and imaginative play including day and night dreams, and the extensive make-believe play that almost all children engage in. Casual observations by parents, teachers, day-care workers, as well as developmental psychologists, leads one to recognize that in young children, and here I refer to children between 3 and 8 years of age, that the above-mentioned phenomena are an important part of children's development; particularly affective and cognitive development.

Despite their importance, child psychologists have studied these fascinating aspects of the child's world very little. A cursory review of textbooks on child development reveals a neglect of these topics. In fact one is more likely to find discussion of these intriguing phenomena of childhood in books and articles written by folklorists, novelists, and writers of children's books than by child psychologists. The sources of this professional neglect would make an interesting study in the sociology of knowledge. However tempting as such an endeavor might be, I will resist and leave that perhaps for another occasion.

I would like to make two observations before turning to our study. First, in recent years there appears to be an increasing concern (and investment)

in studying the inner world of children and their involvement with fantasy characters and imaginative behavior. Although some interesting research has been undertaken, progress will probably be slow, since expressions of imagination of any type are difficult phenomena to define, measure, and interpret.

Second, the attention given to these phenomena has largely come from child clinical psychologists and child psychiatrists. They, as one might expect, have been primarily concerned with psychopathological features of these phenomena: the role of fantasy in child psychosis and other fantasy dominated conditions, the negative effects of believing in mythical characters upon the child's development of a reality-oriented conception of physical causality, and other possible maladaptive consequences resulting from believing in such things as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and similar phenomena. As valuable as these studies of the role of fantasy in psychopathology may be, comprehensive understanding of the phenomena must include an understanding of their adaptive significance in the development of the normal child.

Some attention to these interesting phenomena of childhood, has been given by writers of books and columns providing advice to parents. For example, quite frequently, prior to Christmas, newspaper columns or articles discuss advantages and disadvantages of believing in Santa Claus and provide advice to parents on how to handle children's questions about the existence of Santa Claus and related questions. The advice of the experts is frequently contradictory and lacking in empirical footing.

A persuasive case can be made for one to consider the possibility that these imaginative phenomena may not produce exclusively negative effects on children. For example, Bettelheim (1976), in his recent book The Uses of Enchantment, argues for the important role the folk fairy tale plays in helping the young child grow

and cope with the challenges of its everyday existence. Let me quickly state that Bettelheim does not stand alone in making this argument. Indeed, several developmental psychologists, arguing from a limited data base, have presented evidence of the healthy and adaptive use of fantasy, make-believe, and imagination. Of course they do so with proper concern for the abnormal involvement with such phenomena which does occur in some instances, typically those seen in child guidance or residential treatment centers. However, it is my contention that such pathological cases represent a fraction of the total population of children. We must now try to learn about those aspects of children's involvement with imaginative phenomena which may be helpful for them as they face the tasks of growing up.

In my review of the literature I have uncovered no theory of development that directly dealt with children's beliefs in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy or the Easter Bunny, though several developmental theories deal more generally with the child's increasing sense of reality and control over his fantasy life as he matures. While some theorists have been concerned with children's imaginative play, (e.g. Erikson, A. Freud), these theorists have not directly addressed the phenomena of this paper.

I do not know of any systematic empirical studies of children's beliefs on the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. However one of my students, Linda Schmechel (1975) studied some aspects of children's beliefs in Santa Claus. In her sample of preschool, first and third grade boys and girls, she found that belief in Santa Claus decreased as a function of increasing age. Using several Piagetian measures of physical causality, she also showed that causal reasoning increased with age and was negatively associated with belief in Santa Claus (r = -.50).

The study to be reported today examined children's beliefs in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. I was also interested in the effects of parental encouragement or support of these fantasy characters upon their children's beliefs. Since there is such a paucity of information on these phenomena, I also collected a large body of descriptive data. I studied three age groups since I was also interested in changes in these beliefs over time. Only selected aspects of the large body of data can be reported in the limited time available today. In a paper delivered earlier this month at the Western Psychological Association Convention at Los Angeles, some findings bearing on children's beliefs in Santa Claus and the role of parental involvement were reported by my collaborator (Prentice & Manosevitz, 1976).

Method

The subjects were 30 boys and 30 girls, 4, 6, and 8 years of age and their parents (10 from each age). They were selected from nursery, day care, and after school centers providing child care services to children in Austin, Texas.[2] A questionnaire was completed by the child's parent, in most instances the child's mother. All children were individually interviewed at school or at a child care center. Parents were predominantly from the upper-middle class socioeconomic class. Only white Christian families were included (73 percent were Protestant and 13 percent were Catholic). Of the sixty children studied, 27 percent were firstborns and 42 percent were only children.

Measures

Parental questionnaire. Part I of the questionnaire was designed to provide demographic data including nuclear family composition, parental education and occupation, and religious preference. Part II of the questionnaire elicited information on the following topics:

a) how parents describe Santa Claus to their children

b) how Santa Claus is used by the parents to influence their child's behavior

c) parents' perception and support of the child's myth, including such events as visiting Santa Claus, leaving food, drink, or presents for Santa Claus, hanging up stockings, etc.

d) parents' explanation of Santa Claus' existence

e) parental description of child's current belief in the reality of Santa Claus

f) history of child's belief in Santa Claus and, where applicable, relinquishment of this belief

g) parental evaluation of the importance of the child's belief in Santa Claus

h) parental description of the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy as presented to their children

i) the description of the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy which the parents give to their childrens

j) parental ratings of children's beliefs in the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy

k) presence or absence of imaginary companions.

Child Interview. This interview was designed to assess the content and intensity of the child's belief in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, as well as its ability to distinguish between reality and make-believe or pretend.

The following topics were covered in the child's interview:

a) child's fantasy predisposition (Singer, 1973) as assessed through questions regarding play and game activities, and use of make-believe games and friends

b) child's identification and elaboration of Santa Claus and his activities

c) child's perception of parents' attitude toward Santa Claus

d) child's behavioral interaction with Santa Claus including such things:

hanging a stocking, leaving food or other things, visiting Santa Claus

e) child's beliefs and knowledge about other mythical characters such as the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy and its activities and involvement with such characters

f) child's ability to discriminate the Santa Claus, Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy myths from reality

g) child's reaction, where applicable, to its discovery of the myth of Santa Claus

h) child's ability to articulate difference between real and pretend

i) child's report of presence or absence of make-believe friend.

Results

This study has resulted in a considerable body of data, part of which I am still analyzing. Today, I will present only a portion of the results, focusing on Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny and on parental encouragement and involvement with these childhood fantasy characters.

Parental Description of Child's Involvement in Santa Claus

A number of parental items were designed to assess the nature of the child's involvement with Santa Claus. The finding indicate that the children studied were quite involved in believing in Santa Claus and their behavior was quite consistent with beliefs.

For example, 55 percent of 4-year old left Santa food, drink, pictures or drawings on Christmas eve, a practice that rose to 85 percent for the 6-year olds and declined slightly to 75 percent for the 8-year olds. Ninety percent of the children in the sample had hung up a stocking for Santa on one or more occasions, while all had received, on at least one occasion, a gift specifically marked "from Santa Claus". In only 4 cases out of the 60, the children had never been taken to see Santa Claus, and 3 of those who have never visited Santa Claus were 4-year olds. Eighty-seven percent of the children had talked with one of

Santa's helpers. Sixty-eight percent of the children had their picture taken with Santa Claus, and of the 32 percent who had not, 63 percent were 4-year olds.

Children's Involvement in Santa Claus

Children's interviews about Santa Claus were rated blindly for belief by two raters and each child was classified as a believer, disbeliever or tansitional. Belief in Santa Claus was scored when, among other things, the child viewed Santa Claus as a real person, continuously existing as a physical embodiment over time. Disbelief was scored when the child said that Santa Claus is pretend, imaginary or make-believe, or that Santa Claus is Mommy, Daddy, or both, or presents some arguments as to why Santa Claus is not real. Transition was scored when the child was questioning the existence of Santa Claus yet continued to believe in his existence. The children in transition were torn between belief and disbelief, asked others for their opinions, and reported "facts" that could be used to prove or disprove Santa Claus' existence. When rating belief, disbelief or transition, the raters agreed on the classification of 95 percent of the protocols.

Inspection of the data indicated no major sex differences for children's belief in Santa Claus. Thus, the results for the boys and girls were combined and the analysis was conducted using these composite groups. The percentage of subjects in each group by age are presented in Table 1. A chi-square test, using the number of subjects in each cell, revealed a highly significant difference for age ($\underline{x}^2 = 15.36$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < .01$). The largest percentage of children believing in Santa Claus are in the 4-year old group (85%), the lowest percentage of believers are in the 8-year old group (25%). The greatest

percentage of disbelievers (20%) are in the 8-year old group, and the lowest percentage of disbelievers (5%) are in the 4-year old group. Thus, it appears that somewhere between 6 and 8 years of age the largest proportion of the children relinquish their belief in Santa Claus, although even with our 8-year old 55 percent are transitionals.

Parents Support of Belief in Santa Claus and Its Impact on the Child

Parents clearly believe the child's engagement in Santa Claus myth is a good thing. Ninety percent "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that Santa Claus was "good", "exciting", and "fun" for their children. Only 1 mother of the 60 agreed with the statement that Santa Claus had a negative effect on her child because it encouraged the child to wish instead of to work for something he wanted. Some parents invoke the beneficence of Santa Claus in order to help manage their child's behavior. Sixty-four percent of the parents stated that they told their child that Santa Claus would bring him or her presents if he or she were good. However, it appears that this effort produced mixed effects on the child's behavior. Of the 38 parents who used this technique to modify their child's behavior 10 felt that the child behaved most of the time in response to such a contingent statement, 11 some of the time, 10 said they could not tell, while 7 felt the child's behavior seldom improved.

Each parent's questionnaire protocol was rated for the amount of parental encouragement of the child's belief and classified (with 80% agreement by two independent raters) as encouraging, discouraging or ambivalent. Seventy-five percent of the parents were rated as clearly encouraging, 15 percent were discouraging, and 10 percent were ambivalent. When these classifications were analyzed as a function of the child's sex, no significant differences were

obtained. A similar analysis conducted across age, unexpectedly revealed no significant age differences. This result may have been a function of the lack of clarity in some items in the mother's questionnaire (e.g., encouragement to hang up stocking), which did not sufficiently define whether this was a practice which the mother formerly or currently encouraged. Alternatively, the findings may suggest that many parents continue to engage in practices supportive of the Santa Claus myth even after it has become clear that the child no longer believes. Indeed, older children may behave (as do their parents) as though Santa Claus exists even though they know he does not.

Analyzing the level of the child's belief (believer, disbeliever, transitional) across all ages as a function of the parents' encouragement (when identified as encouraging, discouraging, or ambivalent) revealed a highly significant relationship ($\underline{X}^2 = 21.42$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < .001$). This finding suggests that, independent of age, children who are believers are more likely to have been encouraged by parents to believe. Inspection of the data suggests that if the mother is encouraging, the child is most likely to believe although a few children whose mothers were encouraging were disbelievers or transitionals. All children of the six mothers who discouraged belief in Santa Claus were classified as disbelievers.

Parental Description of Child's Involvement in the Easter Bunny

Parents were asked several questions about their own and their child's involvement in the myth of the Easter Bunny and associated activities. Almost all parents, 97 percent, reported that they described the Easter Bunny to their child, 55 percent reported that their child believed in the Easter Bunny, 37 percent had talked to their child about the Easter Bunny, and 42 percent reported that they played down the importance of the Easter Bunny. That the parents are

not as involved in the Easter Bunny myth as they are with Santa Claus, may be in part due to the questionnaire which focused more on Santa Claus. Alternatively, the Easter Bunny may indeed be less salient for the parents in the sense that they do not emphasize the Easter Bunny as much as they do Santa Claus.

Children's Involvement in the Easter Bunny

Each child was asked a series of questions to assess his/her belief in the Easter Bunny. The questions included among others: Who is the Easter Bunny?, What does the Easter Bunny look like?, Can the Easter Bunny talk?, Does the Easter Bunnv come to your house?, Where does the Easter Bunny live?, Is the Easter Bunny real or pretend?

Each protocol was read independently by the raters without knowledge of the age or sex of the child and each child was assigned (with 83% agreement) into the belief, disbelief, or transition category with respect to his belief in the Easter Bunny. For the sample as a whole 57 percent of the children believed in the existence of the Easter Bunny, 32 percent disbelieved in the existence of the Easter Bunny, and 12 were in transition. Inspection of the number of subjects in each belief category, as a function of sex, indicated no major differences. Thus, the responses of the male and female subjects were combined for the analysis. In Table 2 these results are presented for each age and belief category. The $\underline{X}^2$ test of the frequencies in each category revealed a significant difference in the distribution of subjects within the categories ($\underline{X}^2 = 12.48$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < .02$). As can be seen in Table 2, the highest percentage of belief in the Easter Bunny was among the 4 and 6 year old children. The percentage of disbelief at these age periods are quite similar to those for Santa Claus. At eight years of age 60 percent of the subjects no longer believe in the Easter Bunny. As observed with Santa Claus, it appears that there is a significant development shift toward

disbelief in Easter Bunny between six and eight years of age. Interestingly, the transitional category for the Easter Bunny (unlike Santa Claus) appears to capture few children at any age.

Parental Support of the Belief in the Easter Bunny and Its Impact on the Child

Parent protocols were rated for amount of encouragement and support they provided for their child's belief in the Easter Bunny. The raters classified each parent as encouraging, discouraging, or ambivalent and obtained a 65 percent rater agreement. Fifty percent of parents were classified as encouraging, 25 percent as discouraging, and 25 percent ambivalent. There were no significant effects for parental encouragement as a function of sex. However, encouragement as associated with age approached significance ($\underline{X}^2 = 9.42$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < 10$). Parents of 4 and 6-year old children tended to encourage their child's belief in the Easter Bunny somewhat more than parents of 8-year olds.

Analyzing the level of the child's belief across all ages as a function of parental encouragement revealed a significant effect ($\underline{X}^2 = 12.6$, $\underline{df} = 4$, $\underline{p} < .05$). Of the 30 parents who encouraged their child's belief in the Easter Bunny 23 (or 77%) had children who were believers. Of the 15 parents who discouraged their child's belief, 53 percent of their children did not believe in the Easter Bunny.

The Tooth Fairy

Only limited data on children's beliefs and parental practices regarding the Tooth Fairy were elicited from our subjects. Each child was asked who the Tooth Fairy was and what it did. On the basis of these answers, two raters classified each subject into the following categories: believer, disbeliever, transitional, or did not know who the Tooth Fairy was. The interrater agreement was 92 percent. The percentage of subjects in each category are presented in

Table 3. Of the entire sample, 47 percent believed in the Tooth Fairy, 20 percent did not believe, 3 percent were transitional and 30 percent did not know who the Tooth Fairy was. Inspection of Table 3 revealed that the largest group of subjects who did not know the Tooth Fairy were four-year-olds.

Unlike Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, a child's involvement in the Tooth Fairy is tied to the experience of losing a tooth. Since only one four-year-old child had lost a tooth and six six-year-olds had not, only data from the six-and eight-year old subjects who had lost a tooth were analyzed, reducing sample size to 34 subjects for this portion of the data. Almost every child (97 percent) who had lost a tooth had a "Tooth Fairy" leave money for the tooth. However, only half of the children (50 percent) were considered by their parents to believe in the Tooth Fairy.

Many of the children (88 percent) reported that the Tooth Fairy left money, and 70 percent reported that the Tooth Fairy took the tooth away. Approximately one-third of the children reported that the Tooth Fairy was either their mother or their mother and father. No child reported that its father was the Tooth Fairy. Many children identified someone other than their parents as the Tooth Fairy, such as: a "fairy", "godmother", and "the person who takes your tooth and leaves money."

Parental practices regarding the Tooth Fairy were scored so that each parent could be rated as encouraging, discouraging, or ambivalent in their support of their child's belief. Parents who encouraged their child's belief were those who placed money under their child's pillow and usually discussed the Tooth Fairy and its functions with their child. Most parents, 97 percent, were rated as encouraging their child's belief. Thus, parental participation and support of children's beliefs in the Tooth Fairy are very strong.

Discussion

I have presented data to show that children's beliefs in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy are related to age and to parental encouragement of these beliefs. By eight years of age children have begun to relinquinsh their beliefs in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. However, belief in the Tooth Fairy is still quite strong among the eight-year old children. Parents appear to be more involved in promoting children's beliefs in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy than in the Easter Bunny.

Clearly at this point, we can state that parents and children are rather deeply involved in activities associated with belief in these imaginative characters. The age changes reported by Schmechel for children's beliefs in Santa Claus were also obtained in the present study. Moreover, I have shown that a similar set of age-related changes occur for children's beliefs in the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy.

I am currently studying other correlates of children's beliefs in these mythical characters. For example, I am interested in assessing the relationships between these beliefs and fantasy play, imaginativeness, conception of "real" and "pretend" and birth order.

The role cognitive development plays as the child comes to question its beliefs in these myths is an important area for further study. Certainly changes in the child's belief in these mythical characters are related to experience and cognitive abilities. Assessing changes in cognitive abilities between 6 and 8 years of age may help us understand the shifts in beliefs that occur at that time.

I am interested in evaluating the possibility that belief in these imaginative characters of childhood have lasting consequences for the child. For example,

it is possible that children with highly developed fantasy capacities are more capable of adapting to certain stressful experiences of later childhood and adolesence. Thus, a child's belief and involvement in mythical characters may have far more reaching consequences than we have generally recognized.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Children's Beliefs in Santa Claus at Three Age Levels

Belief in Santa Claus	Age in Years 4	6	8
Believe	85	65	25
Disbelieve	5	10	20
Transition	10	25	55

Note: Males and females combined, N at each age equals 20. Entries are percentages within category.

Table 2

Children's Beliefs in the Easter Bunny at Three Age Levels

Belief in	Age in Years		
Easter Bunny	4	6	8
Believe	75	60	35
Disbelieve	15	20	60
Transition	10	20	5

Note: Males and females combined, N at each age equals 20. Entries are percentages within category.

Table 3

Children's Beliefs in Tooth Fairy at Three Age Levels

Belief in	Age in Years		
Tooth Fairy	4	6	8
Believe	20	60	60
Disbelieve	5	20	35
Transition	5	5	0
Do not know	70	15	5

Note: Males and females combined, N at each age equals 20. Entries are percentages within category.